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‘Trial by Media’: Policing, the 24-7 News Mediasphere and the ‘Politics of Outrage’

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Abstract

This article analyses the changing nature of news media-police chief relations. Building on previous theoretical work (Greer and McLaughlin, 2010), we use the concepts of ‘inferential structure’ (Lang and Lang, 1955) and ‘hierarchy of credibility’ (Becker, 1967) to examine former Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) Commissioner Sir Ian Blair’s ‘trial by media’. We focus on the collective and overwhelmingly hostile journalistic reaction to Blair’s declaration in 2005 that, (a) the news media are guilty of ‘institutional racism’ in their coverage of murders, and (b) the murders of two ten-year-olds in Soham, 2001, received undue levels of media attention. A sustained period of symbolic media annihilation in the British mainstream press established a dominant ‘inferential structure’ that defined Blair as the ‘Gaffe-Prone Commissioner’: his position in the ‘hierarchy of credibility’ was shredded, and his Commissionership de-legitimised. The unprecedented resignation of an MPS Commissioner is situated within the wider context of ‘attack journalism’ and the rising news media ‘politics of outrage’.

Key words: hierarchy of credibility; inferential structure; institutional racism; 24-7 news mediasphere; Soham; trial by media; politics of outrage

Introduction

This article examines the ‘trial by media’ that preceded Sir Ian Blair’s dramatic decision to resign as London Metropolitan Police Commissioner on 2nd October 2008.[1] While we are interested in the ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens, 1991) that

[1] Versions of this article were presented at the British Society of Criminology Seminar Series, LSE, the All Souls Criminology Seminar Series, Oxford, and University of Southampton Sociology Seminar

characterised Blair's news media relations throughout his period in office, our empirical analysis focuses on the journalistic reaction to his declaration in 2005 that, (a) the news media are guilty of 'institutional racism' in their coverage of murders, and (b) the murders of ten-year-old Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in Soham, 2001, received disproportionately high levels of news media attention.[2] These interconnected claims infuriated an already antagonistic news media. An overwhelmingly hostile and increasingly collective journalistic reaction was instrumental in establishing the dominant 'inferential structure' (Lang and Lang, 1955) that would define Blair as 'gaffe-prone', shredding his position in the 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967) and constituting a turning point in his Commissionership. It is not our contention that Sir Ian Blair was driven from office exclusively by a hostile news media. Rather we argue that it was the intense fusion of metropolitan news media politics, party politics and police politics that ultimately made his Commissionership untenable.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review dominant conceptualisations of the 'special relationship' between the news media and the police, with a particular focus on chief police officers. We utilise two key theoretical concepts – 'inferential structures' (Lang and Lang, 1955) and 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967) which we feel are underused in current research. We suggest that, considered together, these concepts constitute a solid theoretical framework within which contemporary news media-police chief relations can be explored and understood. However, they must first be reworked within the context of a 24/7 news media environment. Second, then, we map out some of the key characteristics of this environment, focusing in particular on transformations in the interconnected spheres of media, politics and policing that are simultaneously de-stabilising and reconstituting news media-police chief relations. Building on theoretical work developed elsewhere

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[2] The 'Soham murders' are one of the UK's highest profile murder cases. Two ten-year-old girls Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman were murdered in August 2002 by Ian Huntley, a local school caretaker. His girlfriend, Maxine Carr was convicted of providing the police with a false alibi for Huntley. The initial hunt for the missing schoolgirls was a global news story. A subsequent official inquiry was highly critical of the police for their failings in this case.

(Greer and McLaughlin, 2010), we introduce a further key concept – 'trial by media' – as an exemplary manifestation of these intersecting transformations and a visible index of the emerging news media 'politics of outrage'. Third, we illustrate the tangible impact of these transformations through an empirical examination of Sir Ian Blair's prime-time 'trial by media', which, we argue, resulted in reputational damage and a process of de-legitimation that were critical in rendering his Commissionership untenable. Finally, we return to our theoretical framework to develop a wider sociological account of the overriding concern in this article: whereas past research has repeatedly found the balance of definitional power in crime and justice news to lie with the police, today we would argue that it has shifted to the 24/7 news media.

Theoretical Foundations: News Media-Police Chief Relations

There is surprisingly little research on the relations between the news-media and police chiefs. It is possible, however, to extrapolate from more general studies of news-media-police relationships, and to adapt and develop the theoretical frameworks they employed. Two concepts have featured to varying degrees across the existing research: 'inferential structures' (Lang and Lang, 1955) and 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967). Lang and Lang (1955) developed the concept of 'inferential structures' to explain how the same political news content could be constructed into multiple configurations, establishing selectively representative frameworks of understanding that shaped how both newsmakers and audience interpreted the story. Ultimately, what they viewed as journalists' 'unwitting bias' could 'influence public definitions in a particular direction' (Lang and Lang, 1955: 171). Whilst Lang and Lang (1955) did not consider the unequal influence of news sources in establishing and maintaining 'inferential structures', Becker's (1967) 'hierarchy of credibility' facilitated a more ideological reading of definitional power. His model proposes that in any society it is taken for granted that governing elites have the right 'to define the way things really are' (1967: 240). Since the attribution of credibility and authority are intimately connected with the mores of a society, this belief has a 'moral quality' (Becker, 1967: 240).

These concepts influenced a few key studies in the 1970s concerned with how the unequal distribution of news media access and influence, the ideological orientation of journalists and sources, and the politicisation of law and order contributed to the reproduction of 'dominant ideology' (Chibnall, 1977; Hall et al, 1978; see also Halloran et al., 1970). For Hall *et al* (1978), news reporting of crime and justice was shaped by elite sources who collectively represent and command institutional power – those at the top of Becker's (1967) 'hierarchy of credibility'. The police were viewed as structurally and culturally advantaged in establishing the dominant 'inferential structure' – or 'primary definition' in Hall et al's (1978) terms – that subsequently set the agenda for future debate. Contemporaneous evidence suggested that, whilst the police perspective might be contested, the asymmetry of power in the communication process meant that it could rarely be meaningfully challenged, still less altered fundamentally. Subsequent studies confirmed – albeit in a less deterministic way – the police as the key definitional force in setting the crime news agenda (Ericson et al, 1989, 1991; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). Chief police officers, as 'authorised knowers', were found to have an especially privileged position within the 'hierarchy of credibility'.

We believe that for faddish reasons, 'inferential structures' and 'hierarchy of credibility' have all but disappeared from more recent research, though they remain entirely pertinent given the conceptual trajectory of much recent work. In the US context, for example, Manning (2001) has noted the tendency for the news media to allocate celebrity status to 'big city' police chiefs. He goes on to demonstrate how, in a culture infatuated with scandal and 'spectacle politics', headline-grabbing 'celebrity' police chiefs can be built-up and knocked-down by the news media in dramatic and newsworthy fashion. William Bratton is probably the paradigmatic example, not just in the US but also globally, of the celebrity police chief (see Bratton, 1998). In the UK context, Loader and Mulcahy (2001a: 42) have conceptualised chief police officers as 'cultural agents' with the symbolic power to 'own', 'frame' or 'control' particular issues in the 'public interest' (see also Reiner, 2000)**.** However, as Loader and Mulcahy (2001a, b) also recognise, contemporary UK police chiefs face an altogether more complicated task when engaging with a multi-

mediated public realm. Two notable consequences have resulted. First, increased awareness that negative media coverage can undermine public confidence in policing has driven extensive investment in risk communication strategies designed to advantage the police perspective in news coverage (Mawby, 2002; Chermak and Weiss, 2005; McLaughlin, 2007). Second, a generation of British chief police officers has traded public prominence for political power. The 'elite police voice' in the UK has been corporatized (Loader and Mulcahy, 2001b: 259). As a result, the outspoken, opinionated police chief has, in theory, been replaced by the politically cautious chief executive.

We would suggest that these professional and political transformations have been paralleled by equally significant shifts within the news media which are currently both under-theorised and under-researched. The combined influence of these shifts has been to increase the likelihood that the police institution and police chiefs, such as Sir Ian Blair, will be subject to intense and critical journalistic scrutiny. In the following sections, we map out some of these key transformations, and both revive and resituate the classic concepts of 'inferential structures' and 'hierarchy of credibility' within the context of an evolving 24-7 global news mediasphere. The aim is to construct a theoretical framework within which contemporary news media-police relations can be researched, and Sir Ian Blair's 'trial by media' can be understood.

New Contexts: Re-Theorising News Media-Police Chief Relations

Contemporary police chiefs must operate within an information-communications environment that differs radically from the more stable and predictable conditions conceptualised in previous research. For our research purposes, the most important dimension of this multi-faceted environment is the emergence of the contemporary 24-7 news mediasphere. A proliferation of news platforms, sites and formats has precipitated a digitised 'convergence of moving images, text, sound and archive' (Marr, 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-10634304). This shift has been paralleled by 'an exploding array of news sources, or *producers of content*' (Pavlik, 2008: 79, emphasis in original; Deuze, 2008; Fenton, 2009). Heightened competition

places a premium on *quick-fire news, personalisation* and *exclusivity* , which ruptures distinctions between: 'mainstream' and 'tabloid'; 'hard' and 'soft' news; 'news' and 'entertainment; and can disrupt the traditional news media orientation toward the established 'hierarchies of credibility'.

Second, the pluralisation and professionalisation of possible sources of 'policing news' has created a multiplicity of alternative 'knowledge workers' (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 19) with access to potentially 'newsworthy' information that may or may not correspond with the official police perspective. The diversification of 'police voices' makes the communication of an authoritative police viewpoint – and therefore the establishing of a dominant 'inferential structure' in the news media – difficult.

Third, whilst news commentaries on the police historically came from a small group of specialist journalists (Chibnall, 1977; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994; Reiner, 2000), today political editors, features writers, columnists and social commentators – the new *commentariat* – are all enthusiastic in venturing their opinions. This expansion and diversification can partly be explained by the slashing of news budgets and the requirement for senior staff and lead commentators to develop their portfolios across a broader range of topics (Mawby, 2010). But it is also, we would suggest, connected with wider cultural change.

The widely cited decline in confidence and trust in institutional authority (Beck, 2006; Fukuyama, 2000; Dogan and Seid, 2005) is manifested in the emergence of what we term a cynical 'politics of outrage'. This 'politics of outrage' is simultaneously expressed and amplified in an increasingly adversarial news media. Market-driven newspapers, particularly in the UK, are inclined to initiate and support anti-establishment campaigns and protests, and can draw from an unprecedented array of both professional and amateur news sources to do so. Adherence to a deferential 'inferential structure', reinforcing established 'hierarchies of credibility', does not boost readership sales. The promotion of adversarial 'inferential structures' and the manufacture of dissent does (Milne, 2005; Protess et al, 1991; Sabato, 1993;

Sabato et al, 2000; Lloyd, 2004; Barnett, 2002). When news media adversarialism and the 'politics of outrage' coalesce in a sufficiently coherent and collective manner, routine 'attack journalism' can evolve into full-blown 'trial by media'.

Trial by Media

The notion of 'trial by media' has featured only sporadically in journalistic and academic debate, so there is limited theoretical or empirical work to draw from here (Greer and McLaughlin, 2007; Hastings, 2007; Hutton, 2000; Jenkins, 2006; Linklater, 2007; Williams and Delli Carpini, 2000; Grochowski, 2002). For the purposes of this article, we define 'trial by media' as a dynamic, impact-driven, news media-led process by which individuals – who may or may not be publicly known – are tried and sentenced in the 'court of public opinion'. The targets and processes of 'trial by media' can be diverse, and may range from pre-judging the outcome of formal criminal proceedings against 'unknowns' to the relentless pursuit of high-profile celebrity personalities and public figures deemed to have offended in some way against an assumed common morality. Two decades ago, Katz (1987: 68) conceptualised crime news as a symbolic resource that 'speaks dramatically to issues that are of direct relevance to readers' existential challenges', allowing them to engage in 'daily ritual moral workouts' as they seek to negotiate their own moral fortitude. Today, as the news media *commentariat* cast themselves as moral arbiters of the 'public interest' in a climate of ambiguity and uncertainty, news consumers' same moral muscles are exercised as 'trial by media' spotlights a diversity of 'suitable enemies' (Christie, 1986) for public scrutiny and judgement.

We would suggest, however, that despite their diversity, such 'trials' share certain core characteristics. It is in identifying these core characteristics that we seek to differentiate 'trial by media' from other conceptualisations of news media reaction, such as 'moral panic' (Cohen, 2002; Garland, 2008; Young, 2009). In each case, the news media behave as a proxy for 'public opinion' and seek to exercise parallel functions of 'justice' to fulfil a role perceived to lie beyond the interests or capabilities of formal institutional authority (see also Machado and Santos, 2009). Due process and journalistic objectivity can give way to sensationalist, moralising

speculation about the actions and motives of those who stand accused in the news media spotlight. Judicial scrutiny of 'hard evidence' yields ground to 'real time' dissemination of disclosures from paid informants and hearsay and conjecture from 'well placed sources'. Since the news media substitute for the prosecution, judge and jury, the target may find themselves rendered defenceless. The default 'inferential structure' is 'guilty until proven innocent'. Once crystallised, this inferential structure ensures that the 'guilty' will be subjected to righteous 'naming and shaming' followed by carnivalesque condemnation and ridicule (cf Bahktin, 1968). The result, as we shall see, can be deep and lasting reputational damage. This form of mediatised punishment is characterised by 'grotesque realism' and 'relentless savagery' (Hutton, 2000: 30). It amounts to a public execution in the 'society of the spectacle' (Debord, 1970). The public appeal of 'trial by media' is evidenced by increased circulation and web traffic (Greer and McLaughlin, 2010). Our central argument, then, is that the transformations outlined above have coalesced to create a highly adversarial, volatile and interactive news mediasphere within which authorities and elites must increasingly struggle *against* the flow of news media opinion to maintain a positive public profile.

In this climate, the 'elite police voice' must continually compete to be heard above the clamour of myriad other 'credible' voices, each vying to assert their own versions of reality or positions on crime, justice and policing issues. Past research indicated that, because of their privileged position in the 'hierarchy of credibility', the police were advantaged in establishing the dominant 'inferential structure' in crime and justice reporting: in short, the police routinely set the crime news agenda. Today, we would suggest that the official police position is often one of reaction, attempting to regain the initiative and respond to information flows that are simply beyond their control. Where once the police were crime news 'gatekeepers' (Ericson et al, 1991), 'patrolling the facts', they are now 'crime news stakeholders', just one group among many – and a fragmented one at that – involved in an ongoing and uncertain process of 'negotiating the facts'. Where once the police were the key players in a process of 'agenda setting', they are now part players in an altogether more complex and unpredictable process of 'agenda building' (Lang and Lang, 1983). In the following

sections, we shed further analytical light on the changing nature of news media-police chief relations, and the rising news media 'politics of outrage', by analysing the 'trial by media' that defined the ill-fated Commissionership of Sir Ian Blair. First, though, a note on our sources.

Data Sources

The media analysis presented in this article was divided into two stages. Stage one involved a comprehensive search of the LexisNexis database in order to locate relevant press coverage and identify the key 'newsworthy' incidents of Blair's Commissionership for closer examination. Since databases like LexisNexis strip news content of style, colour, images and surrounding context, providing researchers with a useful but only partial representation or 'news residue' (Greer, 2010), stage two involved in-depth examination of selected news items in original hard copy. Supplementary material from broadcast and online news outlets was used, with some key programmes being accessed via Internet 'on demand' services. In addition to analysing news coverage, we examined the Metropolitan Police Authority reports and official statements relating to Sir Ian Blair's Commissionership. We were also able to use the (auto)biographies of police officers who featured prominently during Blair's time in office, including, Sir John Stevens (2006), Ali Dizaei (2007), Brian Paddick (2008), Andy Hayman (2009) and, of course, Sir Ian Blair (2009) himself. These controversial texts provided an invaluable insight into the different versions of reality that constituted Scotland Yard during Blair's Commissionership.

The Initial Inferential Structure: Sir Ian Blair as the 'Politicised Commissioner'

Sir Ian Blair was the first MPS Commissioner to contend with the political and news media environment discussed above. Like his predecessors, Blair had to transact the politics of policing with the Home Office, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), national and force-specific police pressure groups, as well as Downing Street, London's political establishment and public pressure groups. However, the constitutional landscape that Blair encountered was further complicated by the creation of the Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) – which in turn augmented the role of the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority – and the

establishment of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC). Blair thus had to navigate a largely uncharted political network of complex, mediatised interests.

By the time of his confirmation as MPS Commissioner in October 2004, Blair was already on the news media radar. One of his most notable media interventions came prior to the publication of the Macpherson report in February 1999, when Blair, then Chief Constable of Surrey Police, generated sustained media interest by publicly criticising a reactionary police culture. He insisted that fundamental reform was the only solution, and expressed explicit support for New Labour's policies. At this time there was press speculation about Blair being a possible successor to the outgoing Commissioner, Sir Paul Condon. Though it was Sir John Stevens who took on that role in 2000, Blair became his Deputy. Through ongoing and occasionally controversial media appearances, Blair established a media profile that was widely reproduced in the run up to February 2005, when he would take control of Scotland Yard. The headline was that Blair was ideologically and substantively different from his predecessor. Sir John Stevens was a 'coppers copper' who had restored officer morale post-Macpherson, and had left office without a post-9/11 terrorist attack in London. Blair, by contrast, was an outsider – Oxford-educated and cosmopolitan in outlook, with celebrity friends and political connections. He was a moderniser who articulated a radical analysis of policing needs in contemporary Britain.

An early press consensus regarded Blair's appointment as MPS Commissioner as politically significant and, therefore, newsworthy. Every word and gesture would be subject to media scrutiny. The liberal broadsheets had high expectations of the progressive chief police officer who stood outside the traditional 'canteen culture'. The *Guardian* welcomed Blair as a transformational police leader: 'the standard bearer for a new kind of policing: reforming, inclusive and community-minded' (see Cowan, 2005: 6; see also Cowan, 2004; Rose, 2005; *New Statesman*). The *Independent* (29th October: 8) buoyantly announced that 'Reforming deputy is new Met police chief'. In contrast, the tabloid and conservative press were instinctively alarmed that the most powerful police officer in the UK was not only named Blair,

but was a self-proclaimed liberal reformer who had publicly aligned himself with New Labour's political agenda. The *Mirror*, *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Star*, and *Times* (28th – 30th October) were consistent in their analysis: Blair was 'Labour's favourite policeman', inextricably linked with 'political correctness'. Thus, the 'politics' of Blair's appointment was a live news media issue from the outset. Our research indicates that, as he took office, an initial 'inferential structure' was already in place. Across the spectrum of newspapers, Blair was constructed as a 'politicised Commissioner' – 'politically correct' in his approach, and 'politically aligned' with New Labour's policing and criminal justice agenda. Sections of the news media had started gathering evidence for a 'trial by media' even before Sir Ian Blair had started in post.

The new Commissioner used his 'first week on the job' interviews to discuss a range of crime issues and to explain his 'Together' reform programme, which would make the MPS more ethnically representative and prioritise neighbourhood policing. Blair's detractors saw early evidence of 'political correctness' when he spent thousands of pounds amending the Scotland Yard strapline from 'Working for a Safer London' to 'Working together for a Safer London', and changing the typeface so it conformed with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Rank-and-file officers, it was reported, were infuriated by the decision, and Dominic Grieve, the Conservative Party's Shadow Attorney General, described it as 'a load of nonsense' (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 2005, page 2). However, the clearest proof that the new Commissioner was 'the PC (politically correct) PC' (*Guardian*, July 2nd, 2005: 9) came in June 2005, when an Employment Tribunal decided that the MPS had racially discriminated against three white officers who were disciplined after allegedly making racist remarks to a colleague. Blair, who had personally intervened in the case, was found responsible for seventeen acts of unfavourable treatment based on race resulting in white officers being 'hung out to dry' (*Express*, June 28th: 6; *Daily Telegraph*, June 28th: 2; *Daily Mail*, June 28th: 1; *Sun*, June 30th). In a follow-up interview in the *Guardian* (2nd July 2005), Blair acknowledged that any perception he had betrayed fellow officers would be damaging, and that the tribunal ruling would generate further opposition to his reform agenda. But he refused to apologise.

In addition to being 'politically correct', Blair stood accused of being a 'politically aligned' Commissioner, too readily supportive of New Labour's policies. In April 2005, in the run-up to the UK General Election, Blair alienated the liberal press and civil liberties groups when he endorsed New Labour's counter-terrorist legislation and plans for compulsory ID cards. Earlier that year, commentators on both left and right had queried Blair's political judgement when he declared that London's middle- and celebrity-class drug users would not be exempted from a drugs clampdown, and that the MPS would be making 'a few examples of people' (*Daily Mail*, 2nd February, 2005: 15; *Express*, 5th February, 2005: 23; *Sunday Mirror*, 6th February, 2005: 14; *Observer*, 6th February, 2005: 14). When the tabloid *Daily Mirror* (15th September, 2005) printed front-page images that, it claimed, showed supermodel Kate Moss snorting cocaine, the MPS found itself under pressure to follow through on Blair's pledge. The ensuing 'Cocaine Kate' news story rolled on messily as the model fought to save her career. Moss was formally interviewed by the MPS in January 2006. But in June the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) announced, to the embarrassment of the MPS, that no charges would be brought since the case was 'impossible to prosecute' (*Sunday Telegraph*, June 18th 2006: 33). By September 2006, a swathe of new contracts indicated that Moss had not only survived the investigation, but had sensationally resurrected her career. For some liberal commentators, the case debunked the spin that Blair was progressive, since it was he who had signalled to the press that the MPS was looking for a celebrity scalp.

Within a matter of months, then, Sir Ian Blair had aggravated the conservative and liberal, tabloid and broadsheet press. Though the Commissioner's early operational and media interventions were reported with some variation across different newspapers, an early journalistic consensus emerged around his construction as a 'Politicised Commissioner'. Yet, as this initial inferential structure was crystallising, questions were already being posed about the soundness of the Commissioner's political sensibilities. Blair's news media charge sheet was growing, and his 'trial by media' was gathering momentum.

The Developing Inferential Structure: Sir Ian Blair as the 'Operationally Compromised Commissioner'

The Commissioner gained considerable news media credit for his handling of the 7th July 2005 London bombings. On 21st July, London was subjected to an unsuccessful repeat attack. The following afternoon the MPS held a news conference at which the world's media received a progress report on the criminal investigation. The Commissioner announced that officers had shot a terrorist suspect at Stockwell underground station. On 23rd July, Blair confirmed that an innocent man, Jean Charles de Menezes, had been shot dead by his officers in tragic circumstances. The Stockwell shooting quickly turned into a prime-time public relations disaster for the MPS.

Partly due to the MPS briefings, the response from the news media and political establishment was broadly sympathetic: given the enormity of the challenge facing the police, accidents may happen. But as the smoke around the Stockwell shooting cleared, how this tragic accident was understood, and how it was reported in the news media, changed dramatically. Disclosures from a variety of sources, including police whistleblowers, indicated that Scotland Yard's version of events was flawed. Sympathetic coverage gave way to a storm of criticism regarding the specifics of what had become a rolling, global news story. The MPS position in the 'hierarchy of credibility' all but collapsed on 16 August 2005, when ITN News sensationally led with documents leaked by an Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) employee. The documents appeared to confirm that the positive identification and fatal shooting of de Menezes had resulted from a catastrophic series of blunders. Newspapers across the spectrum splashed the exposé on their front-pages, maximising its visual impact with a leaked colour photograph of de Menezes lying dead in a pool of blood on the train floor. Journalists gave high-profile coverage to the *Justice4Jean* campaign's calls for officers to face murder charges, and for Sir Ian Blair – who the campaigners viewed as responsible for overseeing an execution – to resign. Blair's problems intensified when the IPCC decided to establish a second inquiry into whether and how Scotland Yard misinformation had been circulated in the news media.

Despite the collective news media charge that the MPS was guilty of 'operational incompetence' and possibly a 'cover-up', and universal press speculation about his future, our research suggests that a number of mitigating factors reinforced Blair's position at that time. First, the Prime Minister, Home Secretary, Mayor of London, Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and London Labour politicians rallied to his support. Second, the criticism of Blair was tempered in the conservative news media by concerns that hard-line anti-war groups had 'hijacked' the death of de Menezes as part of an attempt to undermine public support for Britain's 'war on terror'. Third, the official, rather than news media, verdict on the MPS and the Commissioner would not be known until various inquiries were made public. And finally, there was no obvious successor to Blair at that time. Blair's position was destabilised, but not critically. The events that followed would establish the dominant inferential structure around the already embattled Commissioner and, we would argue, initiate the endgame in Sir Ian Blair's unrelenting 'trial by media'.

The Dominant Inferential Structure: Sir Ian Blair as the 'Gaffe-Prone Commissioner'

On 26th January 2006, the Commissioner reported back to the MPA on the state of crime in London one year after his appointment. The meeting was well attended by the news media. The MPS was congratulated following arrests in relation to the murder of Tom ap Rhys Pryce, a 31-year-old, Cambridge-educated city lawyer who had been murdered in a North London street robbery on 12th January 2006. The killing immediately preceded the release of Home Office statistics indicating a dramatic increase in street robberies. This, along with the emotional public response of ap Rhys Pryce's fiancé and family, fuelled news media demands for the quick apprehension of the killers, who had been caught on CCTV. Set within the context of public concern about rising violence in London, the case received extensive news media coverage, featuring on newspaper front pages and the BBC's 'Crime Watch' programme.

The Commissioner was asked if the resourcing of murder investigations was influenced by news media exposure. In reply to the follow-up question, asking how

the MPS ensured a 'proportionate response', the Commissioner answered (statement available from MPA website: www.mpa.gov.uk).

> I am pretty furious. We do devote the same level of resources to murders in relation to their difficulty. It is not about our resources or our intent. Every single life is equally important. What the difference is, is how these are reported. I actually believe that the media is guilty of institutional racism in the way they report deaths. That death of the young lawyer was terrible, but an Asian man was dragged to his death, a woman was chopped up in Lewisham, a chap shot in the head in a Trident murder – they got a paragraph on page 97. With one or two exceptions, clearly Damiola Taylor was one, the reporting of murder in ethnic minority communities appears not to interest the mainstream media.

Blair said the MPS was obliged to respond to news media interest in murder cases. He further illustrated his frustrations with news media selectivity using the following example:

> If you look at the murders in Soham, almost nobody can understand why that dreadful story became the biggest story in Britain. Let's be absolutely straight. It was a dreadful crime, nobody is suggesting anything else. But there are dreadful crimes which do not become the greatest story in Britain. Soham did for that August [2002] period become the greatest story.

After the MPA meeting, Blair told journalists: 'There are lots of murders of people that do not get that kind of coverage; sometimes they do, sometimes they just don't. Putting it bluntly, it is a quiet news day. It's August; these things can blow up.' Blair's press officer cautioned that his unguarded 'on the record' remarks might be a problem (Blair, 2009), and Scotland Yard issued a clarifying statement later that afternoon which stressed the Commissioner's full awareness that the Soham murders were 'appalling'. But Blair's media critics were already writing the headlines: another race row was about to envelop Scotland Yard.

There were at least two possible stories, both of which related to the news values of the press when reporting murder. First, was Blair factually correct in his assertion that ethnic minority murder victims were less newsworthy than white murder victims? Secondly, why had the Soham murder case been deemed so extraordinarily newsworthy? In both instances, Blair seemed determined to pick a fight with the news media. The response was immediate: the Commissioner's comments and the news media's reactions circulated rapidly across the online and traditional news media. This, we would argue, was the beginning of the decisive stage in Sir Ian Blair's 'trial by media'.

The Charge: The 'Soham Slur'

Although both stories featured heavily across all sections of the news media, it was Blair's 'Soham slur' that dominated. A deluge of front-page splashes, inside news stories, leading articles, editorials and commentary pieces debated, but mostly condemned, the 'incendiary' comments of an 'unhinged' police Commissioner who could not understand why the Soham murders had become a global news story. Blair found himself juxtaposed with the iconic colour photograph of Holly and Jessica, summary reminders of how they had died, and outraged comments from a variety of victims groups. The running sub-commentary was that Blair needed to either substantiate his allegations or apologise:

> 'Cop: Holly & Jessica Why All The Fuss?' (*Daily Star*, 27th January, 2006: 12)
> 'Met Chief: Why all the fuss about Soham?' (*Daily Telegraph*, 27th January, 2006 : 1)
> 'Why All The Fuss Over Soham, Asks Police Chief; As he accuses media of institutional racism, an astonishing statement from the Met boss' (*Daily Mail*, 27th January, 2006: 1)
> 'Has Britain's Top Copper Lost His Grip On Reality? Leader' (*Daily Express*, Leading Article, 27th January, 2006: 10)
> 'Why Was Soham Such A Big Story?; Asks Britain's Top Cop' (*Daily Mirror*, 27th January, 2006: 17)

'Soham slur: the Sun Says' (*Sun*, Leading Article, 27th January, 2006: 6)
'Why did Soham get so much attention?, asks Britain's top policeman' (*Times*, 27th January, 2006: 1)

An instinctive defensiveness obliged some level of press engagement with Blair's 'institutionally racist news media' pronouncement. Print and broadcast news editors explicitly rejected the accusation, claiming it represented a serious error of judgement. The *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *London Evening Standard* reproduced previous front pages reporting the murders of black and ethnic minority teenagers to *prove* that they gave coverage to victims of all backgrounds. There was general press acceptance that crime reporting is (necessarily) selective. Nevertheless, Blair was condemned for failing to produce any evidence to support his claims about the primacy of race. It was only the liberal *Independent* and *Guardian* that featured Blair's 'institutional racism' remarks as their primary news story:

'Met chief labels media institutionally racist' (*Guardian*, 27th January, 2006: 7)
'Met chief accuses media of 'racism' over murder cases' (*Independent*, 27th January, 2006: 4)

And even here there was an insistence that race, whilst important, was only one factor in determining the newsworthiness of a particular murder story. Both broadsheets were deliberate in distancing themselves from Blair's 'misguided' Soham comments.

Aggravating Factors: The 'Soham Apology'

On the morning of 27th January, Blair appeared on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme to further clarify his position and, it seemed, to try and re-gain control of the news agenda. The Commissioner was asked if he believed 'if those two little girls, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, had been black, it wouldn't have been picked up in the same way?'. He said he did not believe that, but remained resolute that the news media are institutionally racist. Blair conceded, 'the last thing I need is a war with the

media. The Metropolitan Police Service needs the media and does get their help much of the time'. He continued:

> I obviously have to unreservedly apologise to anyone connected to the Soham murders, especially the parents of Holly and Jessica for re-igniting this story. It was not intended to diminish the significance of this dreadful crime, which is exactly how I described it. But... I was responding to a question raised about the differential response to different murders and that led to an entirely legitimate discussion about the difference between investigative needs and news values (BBC News online, 27th January 2006; available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/4653130.stm).

This was the 'gotcha' moment in Blair's 'trial by media'. The Commissioner found himself locked into a news media maelstrom in which he was compelled to make a public apology and an unequivocal U-turn around his Soham comments. As an exercise in damage limitation, Blair's *mea culpa* interview not only failed to halt the news media backlash, it actively fuelled it. The following day he was vilified in a torrent of press reports decrying his 'crass insensitivity' (*Daily Mail*, 28th Jan 2006: 16), 'ineptitude' (*Daily Telegraph*, 28th Jan 2006: 2) and 'disparagement' (*Times*, 28 Jan 2006: 16), and exclaiming, 'Sorry excuse: As Ian Blair apologies to the Soham families, we ask: How Can This Man Be Britain's' No1 Policeman?' (*Daily Mirror*, 28th Jan 2006: 21). The *Guardian* and *Independent* were now also leading with the 'Soham apology' rather than the news media's institutional racism. News reporting of Blair's 'Soham apology' was intense. However, it was the opinion pieces that did most to crystallise what would be the dominant 'inferential structure' around the Commissioner. A barrage of editorials, features and commentaries dealt at length with the 'Soham' and 'institutional racism' comments. In a decisive shift in the 'agenda building' process, they also began cataloguing Blair's deficiencies as Commissioner.

An editorial in the *Times* opined, 'Sir Ian has demonstrated an unfortunate habit of ill-judged remarks, the latest being his assertion that media interest in the Soham

murders was the result of its institutional racism. He declined an immediate chance to apologise, bowing to the inevitable only after surveying yesterday's headlines' (28th January 2006). The *Daily Telegraph*'s Simon Heffer quickly dismissed the Commissioner's accusations of institutional media racism through reference to the high-profile coverage of the Stephen Lawrence, Victoria Climbié and Damilola Taylor murder cases (28th January, 2006: 23). He then denounced Blair for his 'demented political correctness', his desire to use the police 'for social engineering projects rather than to fight crime', his obsession with 'the press conference and the media appearance', his preoccupation with 'furthering a political agenda', and his command structure's failure to 'prevent an innocent Brazilian electrician being riddled with police bullets on his way to work' (ibid.). The Commissionership, Heffer insisted, 'should not be entrusted to a man who is such a blithering, cack-handed, offensive creep… He used to be a joke. Then he became a liability. Now he is a disgrace. Sack him' (ibid.). On the adjacent page, Vicki Woods (28th January, 2006: 24) targeted the 'Soham slur' and Blair's media profile. The Commissioner was described as 'a clodhopping foot-in-mouther who has spent his first year as chief of the Met being baffled by one headline after another. His every attempt at 'clarifying' a headline issue, or in this week's cock-up a two-headline issue, doubles the damage' (ibid.).

The *Daily Express*' lead article expressed outrage that the 'increasingly eccentric police commissioner' had 'managed to grossly insult the memory of murdered Soham schoolgirls Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman and fabricate a nonsensical complaint against the media for 'institutional racism''. Rather than deal seriously with crime, it suggested, 'Sir Ian would rather pontificate like a media studies windbag over political correctness and 'diversity' issues, and deliver ponderous lectures...' (28th January, 2006: 23). 'His predecessor, now Lord Stevens, inspired both the respect of the public and the affection of rank-and-file police officers. In contrast, Sir Ian has become a ludicrous figure in the eyes of the public and is said to be alienated from ordinary coppers' (ibid).

Even for Blair's liberal media supporters, his 'irresistible urge to the own goal' was becoming a troublingly familiar characteristic. The *Guardian*'s Owen Gibson stressed that London Mayor, Ken Livingstone, and various community groups had come out in support of Blair's allegations of institutional news media racism (28th January, 2006: 4). Yet the article closed with a section sub-headed 'Other controversies', which referred to, among other things, the Commissioner's publicity seeking behaviour, claims that he misled the public following the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes, and his role in 'politicising' the police by backing New Labour's 90-day detention plans. A feature in the *Independent* (28th January, 2006: 36) insisted that 'Sir Ian, who is making considerable efforts to reverse the bias within his forces, has a right to ask the media to look into its own practices as it abuses the Met for its actions'. Yet it opened with the statement that 'Sometimes the Metropolitan Police chief, Sir Ian Blair, seems to open his mouth only to arouse confusion, retraction and apology'.

But it was the *Daily Mail*'s Steven Wright who introduced the term that would be pivotal in instituting the *dominant* inferential structure around Sir Ian Blair. In an article headlined, 'Sorry just won't do Sir Ian', Wright questioned the future of the Commissioner in light of the Soham comments, the Stockwell Shooting and his political connections with Tony Blair: 'Downing Street, normally supportive of the man dubbed Britain's most politically correct policeman, issued a lukewarm statement and a number of high-ranking Scotland Yard officers said gaffe-prone Sir Ian was becoming a liability, and questioned whether he could keep the job he has held only since last February' (*Daily Mail*, 28th Jan 2006: 4).

The Verdict: The 'Gaffe Prone' Commissioner

The daily press' feeding frenzy set the tone and content for the weekend's coverage and continued into the following week. The term 'gaffe' was picked up by more journalists and, by 1st February, the *Daily Mail*, *Independent*, *Guardian*, *Sun*, and *Daily Express* had all run stories referring to Blair's 'Soham gaffe' or describing the Commissioner as 'gaffe-prone'. By the time Blair resigned in October 2008, all the national newspapers were routinely characterising him in this way. Following the Soham controversy, then, there was a convergence of news media opinion – not a

full complement of newspapers, but a significant and substantial sample representing tabloid and broadsheet, conservative and liberal – around the notion of Ian Blair not only as a politicised Commissioner, but as a time-limited liability. The Commissioner's attempts to push back against the news agenda had unequivocally backfired. His 'natural' position in the 'hierarchy of credibility' was being shredded, even, it seemed, in the eyes of his news media supporters. The press were firmly in control of the news agenda, and were speaking with an increasingly coherent and consensual voice. A dominant 'inferential structure' had now crystallised around Sir Ian Blair. His initial news media construction as a 'politicised' Commissioner, and then as an 'operationally compromised' Commissioner', was consolidated into and superseded by a 'master status': *the 'Gaffe-Prone' Commissioner*.

Our research indicates that the crystallisation of a common news media vocabulary provided the framework within which the Commissioner's future activities would be ordered and interpreted as 'news'. Furthermore, it offered journalists a means of historicising and retroactively making sense of Blair's past words and deeds. The caricature of Blair as unfailingly 'gaffe-prone' established a *dominant* inferential structure within which previously isolated incidents could be re-visited, re-connected, and re-presented as an essentialising narrative with plenty of room for further development. Journalists were also on the lookout for anything that could trip up the Commissioner. Newspapers across the political spectrum, in addition to police officers and politicians, converged around one amplifying and de-legitimising question: 'When will the gaffe-prone Sir Ian Blair go?'.

The Sentence: 'Unfit for Office' – Blair Must Go

By the end of January 2006, headlines were declaring that the 'Gaffe Prone' Commissioner was not only haemorrhaging cross-party political support, but had lost his grip on the MPS and was bearing the brunt of rank-and-file dissatisfaction. The Metropolitan Police Federation, representing some 25,000 officers in London, had been asked by then Deputy Commissioner (and Blair's successor as Commissioner), Sir Paul Stephenson, to issue a public statement of support for the Commissioner. They declined, and a series of off-the-record briefings appeared to confirm that Blair

had been 'placed on notice' by his own people (*Daily Mail*, 3rd February, 2006: 13). The nature of the leaks from insubordinate officers indicated that Scotland Yard was riven with personality feuding more rancorous than any fictional police drama. Blair's much-feted 'Together' reform programme had not survived his first year in office. Further reports disclosed that, whilst the Commissioner had received the backing of Prime Minister Tony Blair, his 'Soham gaffe' had prompted three Conservative MPs to sign an early day motion calling for his resignation and demanding that he 'put an end to his 'thoughtless self publicity'' (*Daily Mail*, 3rd Feb, 2006: 13). Blair's press construction offers a stark illustration of what can happen when metropolitan news media politics, party politics and police politics coalesce:

> 'Is it time for Sir Ian Blair to quit the Met?' (*Daily Express*, 30th January 2006: 45)
> 'Is Sir Ian fit to be top cop?' (*Daily Mail*, 30th January 2006: 17)
> 'How did this idiot become Commissioner? (*Sun*, 30th January 2006: 19)
> 'Plod off: Britain's number one cop faces revolt by 140 of his senior officers' (*Daily Mirror*, 31st January 2006: 1)
> 'Officers call for Sir Ian to quit' (*Times*, 31st January 2006: 2).
> 'Blundering, arrogant and out of touch.. he must go'; Exclusive met chief faces coup by furious officers' (*Mirror*, 31st January 2006: 5)
> 'Plod off…again: Now MPs call for top cop's head' (*Mirror*, 31st January 2006: 18)
> 'MPs want PC Blair to be sacked' (Daily *Express*, 1st February: 2)
> 'MPs Want Sir Ian Out' (Daily *Mirror*, 1st February: 13)
> 'Met chief's hardest task may be to justify actions to court of public opinion' (*Financial Times*, 1st February 2006: 8)
> 'Met chief must quit for Soham gaffe, Say Tories' (*Independent*, 1st February 2006: 6).
> 'Policing London: Why Blair must not quit' (*Guardian*, 1st Feb, 2006: 32).
> 'Don't be paranoid, Sir Ian, but they are out to get you' (*Guardian*, 1st February 2006: 30).

Even the *Guardian* appeared to be giving mixed messages, insisting that Blair 'must not quit' but cautioning that he must 'raise his game' to survive those forces that would drive him from office (*Guardian*, 1st February 2006: 30). A senior MPS officer was quoted: 'We cannot have another fuck-up. We cannot have a Commissioner who is viewed as a chump and a laughing stock' (ibid.). Though Blair remained MPS Commissioner for more than two more years, the 'Soham gaffe' and its immediate aftermath resulted in an escalation of news media attacks. What followed was a prolonged period of symbolic news media annihilation that relentlessly forecast and demanded his departure. The dominant inferential structure established through Blair's 'trial by media' was gaining coherence and momentum as the 'Gaffe-Prone' Commissioner's ultimate downfall became – in the eyes of the press at least – a matter of time.

The Resignation of the 'Gaffe-Prone' Commissioner

The unexpected election of the Conservative Party's Boris Johnson and the removal of Ken Livingstone as Mayor of London in May 2008 compounded Blair's political problems, and probably sealed his fate, in three inter-related ways. First, Johnson was a mediagenic character and was highly adept at news media politics. Second, the new Mayor had publicly stated that Blair should be removed from office. Third, he had been granted new legislative powers to assume the chairmanship of the Metropolitan Police Authority. Johnson soon came under pressure from Blair's critics to exercise his Mayoral power. Stories began to circulate that London's new Conservative administration was exploring the constitutional possibility of removing a discredited Commissioner. Blair continued to resist the increasingly vociferous calls for his resignation, and at least publicly dismissed the continual speculation that his political support was draining away. This generated further press attacks on Blair's refusal to step down, and on the government for refusing to remove him. A defiant but politically isolated Blair remained in office, but not in power.

After two years of relentless news media attacks on a variety of public relations and operational 'gaffes', the resignation finally came on 2nd October 2008. On the day that the *Daily Mail* ran a front-page story detailing financial irregularity charges

against the Commissioner, he called a press conference and announced his departure before many of the same journalists who had overseen his unrelenting 'trial by media'. In a carefully crafted statement, he maintained that the decision to resign was not his and that he had hoped to complete his term in office. Blair defended his record, insisting that he was 'resigning not because of any failures of my service and not because the pressures of the office and the many stories that surround it are too much. I am resigning in the best interests of the people of London and the Metropolitan Police Service' (*Sky News*, 2nd October 2008). Without the Mayor of London's support, Blair explained, his commissionership was not viable.

The immediate political reaction was balanced firmly against Blair. While the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats welcomed the decision, Blair's political supporters rebuked Boris Johnston and the right-wing press for what they viewed as a political assassination that would destabilise the MPS. Comparisons were made with Mayor Giuliani's removal of NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton, who had presided over the New York 'crime miracle' (*Guardian*, 3rd October 2008). Commentary and analysis pieces were unsparing in their accounts of Blair's dramatic 'fall and fall'. There were scathing 'good riddance' editorials in the *Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Sun, Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph*, and lukewarm assessments in the *Times*, and *Independent.* Only the *Guardian* reported Blair's departure with regret, though even its editorial conceded that his position had become politically untenable. Whilst much of the news media focus was on how the Stockwell shooting had paralysed his Commissionership, this was contextualised against his seemingly infinite capacity to make 'gaffes' that provoked press outrage and required public apology. Blair's litany of 'gaffes' was listed and re-counted, once again, in excruciating detail. There was a palpable sense of triumphalism among certain journalists, who applauded the Mayor for ousting Blair. Their conclusion was that he had brought his downfall upon himself: this was a serial offender who was incapable of learning from his mistakes but, thanks to a critical and free press, justice had finally been done. Even those commentators who were broadly sympathetic to Blair's agenda, whilst alarmed by the Mayor riding roughshod over the constitutional arrangements of police

accountability, acknowledged the destabilising impact of his public relations and operational 'gaffes'. A clear, albeit partially reluctant, press consensus was discernible: he had to go.

Insert Table 1 here

Conclusion

Determining the extent to which Sir Ian Blair's prime time 'trial by media' resulted directly in his resignation is beyond the scope of our analysis. Blair became a pawn in a political struggle between a re-emergent Conservative Party pressing for a radical overhaul of policing and crime control and a disintegrating, discredited New Labour government. Had there not been an unexpected political realignment in the 2008 London Mayoral election, Blair might have completed his Commissionership. Our aim in this article has been to construct a theoretical framework for researching how the interconnected spheres of metropolitan news media politics, party politics and police politics coalesced to create a mediatisation process in which Britain's most senior police officer could be publicly ridiculed, baited, cajoled, and relentlessly hounded by an increasingly antagonistic press.

Sir Ian Blair's 'trial by media' established a dominant 'inferential structure' that provided journalists, and audiences, with a collective framework and common vocabulary for ordering and understanding the Commissioner's words and deeds, whilst simultaneously decimating his 'natural' position in the news media 'hierarchy of credibility'. In meticulous detail, he was (de)constructed as an organisational liability who had lost his grip on Scotland Yard, forfeited the respect of the rank-and-file and exhausted cross-party political support. Over time, the journalistic repertoire of words and images that came to constitute Blair's 'master status' in the public sphere were those of a 'politicised', 'operationally compromised' and 'gaffe-prone' beleaguered Commissioner.

Our research indicates that Blair's 'trial by media' did more than de-legitimise one Commissioner. It laid down a clear symbolic marker about what 'type' of

Commissioner and policing philosophy is acceptable in contemporary Britain, and sensationally demonstrated the power of the rising news media 'politics of outrage'. Sections of the press were antagonistic towards Blair because of what he represented – a particular brand of 'politically correct' policing at a time when conservative and tabloid commentators were demanding a tougher 'law and order' response to 'Broken Britain'. Ultimately, however, even Blair's media supporters found his position indefensible. For his critics, the 'good riddance' departure of 'New Labour's favourite policeman' was a victory. But a successful 'trial by media' required more than a resignation: to demonstrate unequivocally the news media's supremacy in the court of public opinion, Blair had to be ridiculed and publicly humiliated. Newspapers used the same striking cropped image of a defeated and deflated Commissioner forced to announce his resignation in civilian clothing: stripped of office, stripped of uniform, and, in the eyes of his news media critics, stripped of dignity. 'Unfit for office' was the collective news media verdict, evidenced by a self-reinforcing loop of time-lines and slide shows that will illustrate in perpetuity his 'gaffe prone' Commissionership.

Before his appointment as Blair's successor was confirmed, Sir Paul Stephenson underwent an initial media-vetting, with questions being posed regarding his closeness to Sir Ian Blair and his role in an MPS investigation of Home Office leaks that resulted in the arrest of a senior Conservative politician. In the end, and in sharp contrast to the other named candidates, Stephenson received the conditional endorsement of the Conservative and tabloid press as a welcome alternative to Blair, and a proven champion of 'common sense policing'. On taking over as MPS Commissioner in January 2009, Stephenson immediately distanced himself from Blair's policing philosophy and media predilections (*Evening Standard*, 28th January, 2009: 12):

> 'Sir Ian Blair did it his way and I was his loyal deputy. Now I will do it my way. I don't want to be boring. I don't want to be exciting. And I don't want to be a celebrity. I don't want to be a police leader who people will follow out of a

mere sense of curiosity. It is my aim to be a top police leader in charge of one of the most important police services in the world'.

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